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ABSTRACT

Noting that family violence is a global and pernicious problem, this report summarizes a symposium--sponsored by the Baha'i International Community's office for the Advancement of Women, in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women--on meeting the challenge of and raising public awareness about the scope and seriousness of family violence. Building on a diversity of cultures, professions, experiences, and perspectives, participants proposed that effective efforts to create violence-free families must be designed on the basis of including the whole family and active participation of all social sectors. The report elaborates the following conclusions, which emerged in consensus from the symposium: (1) family violence must be publicly acknowledged as a problem; (2) the social and economic costs of family violence are incalculable; (3) family violence is a human development issue; (4) family violence is a human rights issue; (5) a violent society produces violent families; (6) family violence must be addressed by the world community; (7) NGOs have a major role to play--and they are already playing it; (8) the media must eliminate stereotyped images of girls and women and portray them in egalitarian relationships with men; and (9) educational systems need to redesign curricula, texts, sports programmes and other activities to promote gender equality. Several selected recommendations are listed which were proposed at the workshop discussions from the perspectives of research, education/training, services, and international and national legislation. (AP)

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CREATING VIOLENCE-FREE FAMILIES

A SYMPOSIUM SUMMARY REPORT, NEW YORK, 23-25 MAY, 1994

Family violence is a global and pernicious problem. To meet the challenge of this critical issue, grassroots practitioners, academics, mental health professionals and representatives from more than 30 non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and two UN agencies held a two-day Symposium in May 1994. The Symposium was initiated by the Bahá'í International Community's Office for the Advancement of Women in collaboration with the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) on the occasion of the International Year of the Family, (1994).

Building on a diversity of cultures, professions, experiences and perspectives, participants from China to the Caribbean worked together in an environment of trust and respect. They exchanged points of view and found common ground in a collective commitment to expand their efforts to create violence-free families.

Domestic violence, participants agreed, takes many forms, affects all spheres of society and all aspects of human development. The links between violence in the family and social, structural and political violence are inescapable. Participants explored strategies and raised questions that focused on prevention as well as intervention. What is the best way to raise public awareness about the scope and seriousness of family violence? How does one break the intergenerational spiral and prevent abused children from becoming abused or abusive adults? They explored strategies to help battered wives and daughters develop self-esteem and self-worth, enabling them to expose the historic and powerful myth of their own gender-based worthlessness and to take action on their own behalf. After two days of workshops and discussions, participants reached a consensus that developing a holistic and multi-disciplinary approach to the challenging task of creating violence-free families was not only a necessity, but an achievable reality.

Effective efforts to create violence-free families require a partnership between men and women and the active participation of all social sectors. Strategies for redress and remedies must be designed to include the whole family, because the dynamics of family violence directly affect all its members. That effort must begin, said keynote speaker Dr. Hossain Danesh, Director of the Institute for International Education and Development, in Weinacht, Switzerland, with a new vision of the "family". Whatever its size or composition, he said, that family must be based on "unity, equality and mutual respect rather than power".

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This vision requires a range of actions, from the re-examination of values and attitudes to the definition and criminalization of violent behavior. Awareness-raising, intervention and prevention must be simultaneous processes. "Eradicating violence in the family is not a matter of choice or chivalry or grace or good nature," said Marjorie Thorpe, Deputy Director of UNIFEM, in her closing comments. "It is an obligation and a responsibility imposed on us by our humanity and our interdependence."

The following conclusions emerged in consensus from the Symposium:

Family violence must be publicly acknowledged as a problem. Denial, on every level, is one of the greatest obstacles to eradicating family violence. The human need for love and acceptance often prevents victims from speaking out or even admitting that the abuse is taking place. They must be helped to recognize violence when it occurs—to them, or to a sister, brother, aunt, or grandmother—and be provided with the necessary legal and emotional support services. Women and children must be helped to avoid collusion with men in perpetuating violence by remaining silent, excusing violence, blaming themselves, and accepting cultural rationales.

The social and economic costs of family violence are incalculable. According to Alda Facio, Director of the Women, Gender and Justice Programme at the Latin American Crime Prevention Institute in Costa Rica, these costs range from hospitalization for sexually and physically abused infants, children and women, medical treatment for unsafe abortions and sexually transmitted diseases, to legal fees and support for battered-women's shelters, and foster homes for children.

But the price of violence is not only monetary, said Facio. The inestimable cost of lost productivity by damaged individuals unable to function fully, if at all, of lost psychic identities, and even loss of lives must also be considered. "Think of the millions of women who live with violence and the fear of violence. They lose their sense of identity which has been eroded to the point where they accept the contaminated version of reality dictated by their abusers. Think of the women who pay with their lives, either by their own hands or the hands of others."

Family violence is a human development issue. It damages wives, mothers and daughters who are battered, raped, deprived of human dignity and the means to meet their basic needs. It also traumatizes the children living in these homes, where they witness or are subjected routinely to beatings, sexual and verbal abuse, and neglect. Demonstrating and perpetuating the historically unequal power relations between genders, family violence severely impedes the full development and advancement of both men and women; replicating itself in generation after generation, it stunts the growth and development of whole societies. To pursue effective development strategies, agencies and organizations that work with women and children must increase their sensitivity to the issue of violence and make it central to their work.

Family violence is a human rights issue. Deeply rooted in cultural and religious gender bias, it is supported, even institutionalized, by many patriarchal societies. Family violence arises from social and legal systems that "entrust" the care of women and children to men, in fact, granting them unlimited license to dominate, oppress, even "own" them. In societies where women's rights are overtly thwarted, family violence can be a culturally inbred part of upbringing, embedded in the consciousness of all family members as "acceptable" and "normal". Moreover, contrary to conventional wisdom, a gain in status for women often brings an increase, not a decrease, in reported cases of violence as men feel threatened by a loss of power.

"The first step in ending family violence," said Dr. Nahid Toubia, of the Population Council, "is recognizing that certain practices, such as genital mutilation and widow burning, can be sources of cultural pride and serve to maintain the existing social order." In other cases, she said, people consider wife battering, excessive punishment of children and infanticide of baby girls as "an unpleasant but unavoidable reality".

In many countries, family violence is ignored or condoned in the name of religion, of culture, and of "familism" in which the sanctity of the family unit takes rigid precedence over the safety or sanity of its individual members. At policy-making levels, family violence is often considered a private matter and in many countries, it is not a punishable offense. In some countries, one family member is prohibited by law from denouncing another, even for the most serious and violent acts. And where laws prohibiting family violence do exist, there is often little effort to implement them; in fact, the law is often the last resort for victims of abuse.

Effective use of a human rights framework to create violence-free families will require enforcement of

international conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It will also require state interventions that protect women and children from abuse and prevent such violations from occurring. Religious and political leaders, educators and law enforcement officials must be sensitized and mobilized to support new cultural values of mutual respect rather than domination of one gender over the other.

A violent society produces violent families. Just as family violence affects the wider society, a violent society reinforces and even creates a ripe climate for family violence. Institutionalized violence, oppression, and rigidly maintained economic and social inequalities can simultaneously victimize men and turn them into perpetrators of violence against those even more helpless—their wives and children - in a society already built upon male authority and gender bias. In South Africa, for example, Hlengiwe Mkhize, Director of the Children in Violence Project at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, cited evidence from her country that reveals a clear link between state-initiated oppression and domestic violence. The family unit, she said, becomes the focus of accumulated stress and a fertile ground for multiple acts of domestic violence from family torture and murder, to wife battering, sexual molestation, and the daily mental and physical abuse suffered by children growing up in alcoholic and violent families.

Family violence must be addressed by the world community. It is not a private matter, but has become a global pandemic that the international community can neither ignore nor allow to be protected within the privacy of the family. It is an affliction that ravages all regions of the world, all economic and educational strata and all types of families. The family is the primary locus of human socialization and development. If that development process is denied or distorted, the adverse consequences can be irreversible. Behaviours learned in the home are replicated in the wider society. "We in the United Nations system," said Karin Sham Poo, UNICEF Deputy Executive Director for Operations, in her opening statement, "have at last recognized violence in the family as a formidable obstacle to socio-economic development, to say nothing of universal peace and justice."

Communities and governments must be mobilized for action. They must establish networks and hotlines to reduce isolation and provide safety for victims to speak out. Participatory research is an effective way to sensitize communities to the existence of violence, enabling them to develop their own definitions and their own solutions. A working definition of family violence and a simple checklist of symptoms for use by teachers, nurses, parents, therapists and doctors needs to be developed. Governments must enact and implement laws; develop policies, adequate programmes, and assertive protective measures for victims; provide budget allocations; and mount major public awareness campaigns for the purpose of eradicating family violence.

NGOs have a major role to play—and they are already playing it. Symposium participants acknowledged the daunting nature of family violence as a global affliction that requires a global solution. They were also inspired and motivated by the degree of common concern and the number of concrete grassroots strategies already in place—from Kenya to Canada, from model family projects to teen hotlines. Multiplied worldwide, innovative NGO work in training, rehabilitation, or advocacy can have a powerful impact on reducing family violence. To create violence-free families, the broader development community must develop effective strategies that are multidisciplinary, collaborative and sensitive to the specific cultural and social conditions in which violence occurs.

The media must eliminate stereotyped images of girls and women and portray them in egalitarian relationships with men. The explosion of communications in this century has unleashed a multibillion dollar violence industry of films, television programmes, magazines and music, which glorify violence. They perpetuate the misperception that domestic violence is provoked, even desired by its victims. Media messages that glorify war or social violence as natural expressions of male potency and reinforce the image of women as helpless and available objects of male sexual drives need to be stopped.

Educational systems need to redesign curricula, texts, sports programmes and other activities to promote gender equality. In one Caribbean community, when a secondary school offered an elective course on child development and parenting, the class was composed of more than 50% boys. Youth-oriented organizations, as well, need to focus on educating boys to develop non-violent attitudes through peer counselling, new forms of conflict-resolution, new symbols and role models of masculinity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing from the workshop discussions, Symposium participants proposed the following selected set of recommendations:

Research

■ Gather and analyze new and existing data on types and scope of abuse from victims, hospitals, police reports, and community agencies for use in advocacy and policy-making.

■ Consolidate and disseminate information on successful intervention models and preventive programmes.

■ Conduct qualitative participatory research at the community level to assess the nature, frequency and consequences of family violence and help design intervention and prevention strategies.

Education, Training, Advocacy

■ Provide support and training for front-line child-care givers—families, social workers, and traditional birth attendants (TBAs)—in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of family violence.

■ Sensitize police, judiciary, policy makers, and religious leaders regarding the mental health, economic and social consequences of family violence and train them in preventive strategies.

■ Develop gender-sensitive materials, texts, toys, etc. for dissemination in doctors' offices, community and daycare centers, and wherever families are present.

■ Provide special training for teachers in peer mediation and conflict resolution so that they can teach cooperation in the classroom.

■ Create public awareness through all forms of media and existing community networks, presenting family violence as a serious problem with serious consequences.

■ Organize classes for boys and girls to develop an egalitarian approach to parenting and other roles—i.e. sharing of chores and resources; providing opportunities for girls outside the home, including education and job training.

■ Educate women and children about their rights and facilitate the development of strategies to protect themselves.

Services

■ Provide intervention and support for victims of family violence, including counselling, shelters, crisis centres, and financial and legal support.

■ Offer enrichment programmes for families aimed at empowering the most vulnerable members and reinforcing existing family strengths and resources.

■ Require counselling for abusers, to help them reflect on their own experience and the root causes of their acts, and to learn new ways to build self-esteem and handle rage.

International and National Legislation

■ Disseminate international conventions and specific relevant sections of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, with simple notations on the use of these documents.

■ Enact and promote national legislation that criminalizes all forms of domestic violence and provides monitoring and enforcement mechanisms.

■ Require greater accountability of law enforcement officials, judicial systems, medical and psychiatric facilities, and social services regarding their handling of domestic violence cases.

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